



MASTER FILE

May 13, 1999

DSSD CENSUS 2000 PROCEDURES AND OPERATIONS MEMORANDUM SERIES # G- 5

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Subject: Observation of Lister Training, Crew Leader Assistant Training,
 and Listing Procedures for Census 2000 Block Canvassing in
 Nassau County, NY, on April 7-13, 1999

I. Introduction

The purpose for my visit to Nassau County, NY, was to educate myself professionally by witnessing a Census 2000 Field Operation as well as to gain firsthand insight into the block canvassing operation and how smoothly it is running. I was able to observe the full three day process of lister training administered by one of the Crew Leaders (CL). I also observed the subsequent training of Crew Leader Assistants (CLA) at the Local Census Office (LCO). Finally, I accompanied two listers in the field during the actual block canvassing operation.

II. Observations and Comments

A. Training of Listers for Block Canvassing

The area of Nassau County that I visited (the towns of Rockville Centre, Lynbrook, Roosevelt, Freeport, et al.) was one of over 30 sites encompassed by the associated LCO, located in Uniondale. The training took place at a local Lutheran church, and the class consisted of 14 listers.

Training did not have a particularly auspicious beginning. First of all, the mailing that informed the trainees of the training site listed the wrong street name ("Brookville" instead of "Brookside"). This created confusion and caused tardiness for some of the trainees. Second, the class was originally slated for 16 people, but despite previous assurances to the CL that they would be in attendance, two of the trainees never appeared. Finally (and annoyingly), the class suffered from constant interruptions on the first day. A funeral and a post-funeral reception were taking place at the church that day, and a room adjacent to the choir room (which served as the block canvassing classroom) was the site of that reception. Unfortunately, the choir room had a door that led directly to the outside and had the most convenient proximity to the parking lot. Hence, the classroom was frequently used as a thoroughfare by people preparing for the funeral and the reception despite prominently posted signs that requested they use an alternate entry or exit. The situation and apologies became comical as chairs that blocked the doorways and a clothes hanger used to bar access failed in the deterrence effort. I almost expected the pallbearers themselves to march through with coffin in tow.

The remainder of the lister training was relatively free of hitches. There was confusion at times with regard to examples in the training materials. At times this confusion would lead to rather loud discussion and many people talking at once in an attempt to resolve the problem.

On the second day of training, listers were sent out in pairs to practice block canvassing. (They were sent out on the second day rather than the third day because rain was expected on the third day.) I accompanied one pair of listers as they canvassed four blocks using an actual Assignment Area (AA) book. Aside from the correction of a street name, their workload was rather straightforward. They were unsure what to do with regard to a public school included in one of the blocks which was not included in the address listings. I thought that they should verify if the building contained any living quarters, but the building was closed and had no signs of life. They decided that they should ignore it after returning to class and consulting the CL.

A problem that proved to be a recurring theme during my observation visit was first revealed after returning from block canvassing practice. One pair of listers discovered that many of the housing units listed within their AA book actually existed but were included in the wrong block. The CL pointed this out to the class and stated that housing units listed in the wrong block must be deleted. They should then be added in the correct block, but not until the lister is actually canvassing that block. The CL repeatedly emphasized the need to complete one block at a time and to follow the ground in a clockwise direction.

On the third day of training, the CL chose her CLAs. The listers took a 30 minute final review test. Also, the CL used the lunch hour to go to the LCO and acquire some forms. I accompanied her so that I could learn the location of the LCO and see it in action. She informed me that buzz in the CL grapevine indicated that the inclusion of housing units in the wrong blocks seemed to be a rather widespread problem. Consequently, she obtained a large number of extra block canvassing housing unit addition forms to prepare her listers for this problem. She informed me that training for the CLAs was going to occur on the next workday in the morning. The primary purpose of this training was to teach CLAs about the Quality Assurance (QA) process and inform them about their responsibilities. CLs were also permitted to attend, because it seemed that the QA Dependent Verification procedures had caused some confusion during CL training.

The remainder of the time on the last day of training was spent handing out AA books to the listers and scheduling initial QA observations with the CL or CLAs. At the conclusion of the class I asked for volunteers among the listers so that I might observe the block canvassing process. Two listers accommodated my request. I also used this time to informally obtain information from the CL on behalf of the Decennial Statistical Studies Division's (DSSD) QA Branch. The QA branch was interested in whether or not CLs had received certain QA materials and how well they understood procedures related to those materials. The QA Branch was especially interested in those materials related to the QA Dependent Verification, which were supplementary in nature. The CL was familiar with all of the materials that I mentioned except for Form D-453.2. I later discovered that these forms were not distributed to the CLs but were to be completed by LCO personnel. Also, though she was familiar with the need to use green pencils in recanvassing, she had not received green pencils in CL training. They were distributed during the CLA training that I attended.

B. CLA Training

I wanted to observe the QA Dependent Verification operation. However, since I arrived at the very beginning of the block canvassing operation, there was no QA Dependent Verification for me to observe. I decided that observing the instructions for QA Dependent Verification as they were administered at CLA training was a good opportunity in lieu of witnessing the actual procedure.

The CLA training lasted approximately three and a half hours. The majority of that time was spent providing an overview of Census operations and answering questions related to various general listing problems that the CLAs had already encountered. I am not certain how many CLs were in attendance to attain a better grasp of QA Dependent Verification procedures.

The CLs and CLAs were responsible for three different QA procedures. First, a CL or CLA was required to accompany each lister for an initial observation of the lister's first official attempt at block canvassing. The CL or CLA used a checklist on Form D-453 to keep track of eight potential errors as they observed the lister perform block canvassing for at least ten housing units and no longer than two hours. If the lister made more than one mistake, the CL or CLA was required to repossess the AA book and recommend retraining for the lister. The second QA requirement, weekly observation, was that this same process be repeated for each lister once per week. The D-453 contained space for six weeks, and a form was to be maintained throughout block canvassing for each lister.

The third QA procedure was the QA Dependent Verification. It should be noted that the chosen methodology and materials for this operation were the result of a compromise between Field Division and DSSD. The compromise was necessitated by the need to address operational as well as QA issues, and both divisions recognize that the methodology is not ideal. The drawbacks that I observed are noted below.

CLAs were instructed to perform QA Dependent Verification immediately after the weekly observation. The instructor introduced this QA process by telling the CLAs that it was very complicated and confusing. She referred to the associated Form, D-453.1, as the "most convoluted form I've ever seen." I did not think that it was exceedingly complicated. I suspect that perhaps she - anticipating CLA consternation - was trying to achieve some measure of loyalty or empathy with the CLAs. The one aspect of the form which seemed inconvenient to me was that it had two sides and the attached carbon copy did not seem to function as intended. CLAs were instructed to only fill out both sides of the primary copy and ignore the reverse side of the carbon copy - but still maintaining the carbon copy's attachment. Failure to do this properly could result in an unreadable carbon copy and no information on the reverse side of the primary copy.

Actually filling out the form proved no less daunting for the CLAs, and I found the instructions to be somewhat ambiguous and potentially inefficient. Using a random number table, CLs or CLAs were required to select a random line for the lister's current book. After performing the weekly observation QA, it was implied that the lister would accompany the CL or CLA to the location associated with this random line. (The randomly selected housing unit needed to be part of the completed workload.) The CL or CLA would then verify that the housing unit and the next nine were completed correctly. The random selection procedure and the accuracy of the information for these ten housing units were to be annotated on Form D-453.1. Another housing unit within the completed portion of the AA was then selected, and the procedure was repeated.

I see a few problems with this methodology. First, I did not think that the instructor stressed enough that the CLs or CLAs should follow the ground rather than the book in this QA check. The manual supplement did not do a very good job of stressing this in my mind. I would not be surprised if CLs or CLAs left the class that I attended thinking that following the random sample means visiting the addresses in the order that they are found in the address book. (Within each block, addresses were listed in alphabetical order by street and within each street by the numerical house number.) I believe that specific instructions regarding what to do if the randomly selected housing unit has less than ten housing units in its associated block would go a long way toward clearing up this potential confusion. I also think specific instructions associated with what to do in the case for which a deleted housing unit is found on the selected line number would have been helpful. (This is no small issue in light of the large number of deletions that were required because of housing units located in the wrong blocks.)

Second, I see potential problems associated with the fact that this review is being conducted on a weekly basis by lister rather than by AA book. Though the procedures obviously do not intend that every AA book is checked via QA Dependent Verification, it still seems like a good idea to me. If a lister fails QA Dependent Verification, then his or her book of the moment is reclaimed. I assume that extra work is required to retrieve that lister's previously completed AA books. Also, suppose that the lister has just started work on an AA book when their weekly review is conducted. After finishing the weekly observation required for Form D-453, the CL or CLA and the lister will certainly find it difficult to randomly select twenty completed housing units from the newly opened book. For a partially completed book, the process of randomly selecting a number associated with a successfully canvassed housing unit will use up more of their time than it would for a completed AA book.

Third, I think that it is inefficient that the CL or CLA and lister were instructed to go to the randomly selected housing unit together after performing the weekly observation of the current workload. This interrupts the lister's current work (probably in the middle of a block), and it sends both individuals to two locations (one for each set of ten randomly selected housing units) elsewhere in the AA. I think that a QA Dependent Verification conducted for every completed book (and performed by the CL/CLA alone) would be a much more efficient use of resources and create a better opportunity for completed work to be reviewed properly. Based on the average number of housing units in an AA book and the rate of completion expected of a lister in block canvassing, this would equate to approximately the same workload for the CL or CLA. Guidelines that require the CL or CLA complete the QA Dependent Verification within a certain time period after receiving the completed AA book could help to prevent any backlog.

One CLA described the QA Dependent Verification requirements as "government at its worst." I thought this commentary was definitely extreme, and the instructor did a good job in emphasizing the necessity of verifying the quality of completed work.

Another issue worth noting was that CLAs were instructed to write the identification number for the AA book and the date at the top of form D-453. This was done so that Forms D-453 and D-453.1 could be easily linked at the LCO in order to complete Forms D-453.2 there. Form D-453.2 combines the information found on Forms D-453 and D-453.1.

C. Block Canvassing Observation

The first lister I observed in the official block canvassing operation was very confident and well-organized. Her workload that I observed did not prove to be particularly difficult. One street no longer existed, and another street produced conflicting opinions between residents as to whether or not its name used a directional prefix. Otherwise, it was rather straightforward. She did inform me of some of the types of mistakes that she had already found in her earlier initial work. This included the aforementioned widespread error of housing units' being in the wrong blocks - often on the wrong side of the street. She also found a few cases in which streets no longer reached all the way through a block, which required changes on the AA map. Additionally, she discovered many cases of streets with partially renumbered addresses.

The second lister that I observed was a little less sure of herself. Her workload was not very straightforward. As it was provided, her AA book included some housing units listed in the wrong block and others listed in the wrong AA. One street needed to be added, and another required a name correction. I would estimate that approximately half of the workload associated with this block was either an addition or a deletion. She was not expecting that the AA books could have so many errors. Since she had just finished training, I provided assurances based on the earlier word of mouth that errors of this magnitude were entirely possible. The main block that she canvassed under my observation had a very large area and was very circuitous. A park and its bodies of water comprised the majority of this area, and not all of the boundaries were easily followed streets. To make matters even more complicated, two of the boundaries were very busy roads with limited parking. As a result, she chose not to follow the block using the prescribed clockwise path. This decision almost led to disaster in terms of her including the correct housing units in the block. Despite these obstacles, she eventually completed the block correctly.

III. Conclusions

Those people involved in the block canvassing operation whom I met seemed for the most part to be putting forth a good effort and dealing successfully with the problems found in its initial stages. My most noteworthy observation was the extremely high and unexpected frequency of housing units listed in the AA books as being in the wrong blocks. I would also be interested in how well QA Dependent Verification procedures are followed after hearing instructions that I found to be somewhat ambiguous.

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